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HUDSON BAY COMPANY, 1670–1870.

SUMMARY OF A LECTURE READ BY

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The paper on “The Hudson Bay Company, 1670–1870,” read before this Society, November 18th, was an abstract of a fuller manuscript on the same subject, prepared as a chapter to be printed in one of the forthcoming volumes of the “Narrative and Critical History of America.” That being the original and ultimate purpose for which the manuscript was written, even the abstract of it, as delivered before the Society, cannot with propriety anticipate in print here its final publication. The writer can offer in these pages only a condensed summary of the historical review of his whole subject.

On the first discovery of the “New World,” and the subsequent development of portions of its territory as sighted by navigators coursing its coasts, the Pope of Rome and temporal European monarchs hastened to assume and dispose of rights of possession and dominion here, according to the principles of what was then accepted as international law. Countries newly discovered—the rights of their occupants being wholly overborne for the reason that they were heathen—were regarded as coming lawfully under the ownership, dominion, and disposal of the respective European rulers, whose subjects, as mariners or adventurers, had first

sighted the land from the sea. Under this assumption, the Pope, as the sovereign of all earthly sovereigns, bestowed the whole of the New World upon the crowns of Castile and Leon. These earthly sovereigns, however, were swift to claim, appropriate, and bestow upon their respective subjects portions of this vast whole, to which they could set up any rights founded on discovery. Before there was any certified knowledge of the extent, features, and qualities of this New World, as to whether it were an island, an archipelago, or a continent, royal liberality was most lavishly exercised in granting proprietary and monopoly rights upon it to individuals and to companies, opening rivalries and conflicts on attempts at occupancy and possession. The rights which these sovereigns claimed were based upon their prerogative as "Christian Princes," overruling the actual possession by "heathen people." The inference would be that these "Christian Princes" would respect each other's claims, whether founded on prior discovery or occupancy. But such did not prove to be the case. The necessary vagueness of the terms of donation, and the partition by boundary lines embarrassed even the most fair conditions of the gifts. Charles II., of England, made a most lavish use of this kingly prerogative in bestowing obscurely known territories with monopoly rights of occupancy, trade, and government. In 1670 he gave to his cousin, Prince Rupert, with less than a score of associates, mostly nobles of the highest rank, a charter conveying the region afterwards to be called "Rupert's Land," lying around Hudson Bay, being the land whose waters drained into that icy sea. The gift was made by the king's "especial grace, certain knowledge, and mere motion"; and as not having the

authority of Council or Parliament, the legality of the charter was afterwards continually brought under question among the many other reasons for the controversy with the Company. The representation of the high nobility in the very limited number of the shareholders of the franchise was continued in the Company through its history, and was of powerful influence in protecting it from assaults and in shielding its management from attempted scrutiny. Subsequently the Company obtained for limited periods of time rights in the so-called Northwest Territory, and when there was added Vancouver's Island, it had under its administration a region one third larger than the area of Europe. The monopoly was a giant one, and it was most jealously guarded against persistent inquiry and opposition. Its profits were enormous. Its original capital was £10,500. From constant watering, with very slight assessments, and notwithstanding great losses from contests with French rivals, the capital increased to £500,000, with annual dividends, often of seventy per cent. The business affairs were administered in London by a governor and associates, while its local management here was through a resident governor and a council, with a gradation and a mode of promotion among its servants. These were originally Scotch youth from poor and rough homes in the Orkneys. These youth gladly availed themselves of the opportunities of a wild life of adventure in the labors of the fur trade, seated at their desolate posts by lake or river in the interior. Their first aims were to acquire wealth for a return home. But generally the fascinations of their surroundings and experiences induced a second nature, which retained them here mated with Indian or half-breed com-

panions. Their pay in money—sustenance being provided—was faithfully kept at interest for them by the Company, and maintained them in their retirement.

For many years the Company had posts for collection of furs brought in by the Indians, and for barter with them, only at the mouths of Nelson and Hayes Rivers on the Bay, and at the mouth of Moose River on James Bay. Afterwards it extended its posts, forts, or factories in all directions through its territory in the interior. The water-ways in the open season were admirably suited for its traffic. In the winter dog-sleds served the purpose. Peltries were brought in twice in a year and stored at the posts, to be sent to the London warehouse. At first one vessel annually, afterwards two, came through the icy waters, remaining through a summer month for a change of cargo.

The literature relating to the history of the Company is voluminous, and may be distributed into two classes. In the first of these, gathered in several special libraries, is a series of curious and very interesting volumes written, for the most part, in the wilderness by the more intelligent servants, apprentices, and employees of the Company. These works have the tone and flavor of the circumstances and surroundings amid which they were written, to beguile leisure. They are narratives of adventure and experience. They give us revelations of the alternating solitary and exciting scenes and incidents attending upon life and occupation at lonely posts, on expeditions, and upon the hilarious and boisterous gatherings at some of the more central stations, when brigades of trappers and voyageurs arrived with their loads of peltry. The methods of travel by the water-ways or by

sleds, with their pleasures and perils, are picturesquely presented, and the terrors, resources, and employments of wintering life cover many graphic pages. We have full descriptions also of the conduct of the barter trade with the Indians: the exchange of peltries for European goods at the posts; the pandemonian orgies of the drinking bout which preceded this exchange; the scenes and concomitants of the Indian camp; and then, after the trade had closed, the parting of the motley crews in various directions, either to engage in a buffalo hunt for procuring pemmican—the staple food alike of dogs and men—or to distribute themselves, generally one by one, occasionally in couples, with their traps, to circumvent the beaver, the otter, the fox, the marten, etc., in their favorite haunts. These unique volumes would be a most fascinating feast for boys fond of daring adventure faithfully related.

The other class of literature relating to the affairs of the Company, is a record of quarrels and controversies, involving contests with the French and rival fur companies, contentions incident upon the settlement of the Earl of Selkirk's colony on Red River, founded in 1811, and inquiries instituted before committees of Parliament, as instigated by the embittered enemies of a greedy and grasping monopoly. Though one of the objects of the Company, as avowed in its charter, was the exploration of the country, not only did the Company wholly fail to pursue this, but it sternly opposed such enterprise by others. After the cession of Canada by the French, other British subjects claimed rights against the monopoly. The interested witnesses in defence of the Company before the committees of Parliament, were not only stiffly

reticent about its secrets, but prevaricated sadly in testifying that a region, now the most fruitful grain-bearing country in the world, was hopelessly sterile. It was proved that the Company had debased the natives, was a barrier to the expansion of the Dominion of Canada, and was bent upon keeping a territory where millions of civilized beings might live prosperously, as a mere wilderness preserve for fur-bearing animals.

The time at last came to break this towering and defiant monopoly. Two centuries had been enough for it. Measures initiated in 1867 by Parliament empowered the Queen to accept a surrender on terms. Earl Granville, the Minister, opened correspondence with Sir Stafford Northcote, Governor of the Company, in March, 1869. The occasion and grounds of the transfer were : That the vast regions of the Company were without a recognized government capable of enforcing the law and responsible to neighboring countries for the performance of international obligations ; and that this state of things invited trouble, as mining and agricultural settlers, pressing in from the outside, interfered with Canadian development. The object was to annex all British North America (except the Colony of Columbia) to the Dominion of Canada.

The reasons which were to have weight with the Company, were : that its title, long disputed, was now vigorously assailed ; that serious questions had arisen as to boundaries ; that the territory was liable to the irruptions of Canadians and Americans ; that these were not to be withstood, as the terms of the charter and their internal constitution did not qualify the Company to maintain order and administer government.

“There must be compromise,” said Earl Granville, “though the terms of it are admitted to be difficult. The Company’s estimate of its rights is not acquiesced in by others concerned. A court of law is the only alternative to the proffered compromise. Therefore a proposal is advanced intended to be impartial, to be submitted to the Canadian authorities and to the Company—though not likely to meet the expectations of either. Such as it is it is offered with the understanding that it is final, not subject to modifications or qualifications.

1st. The Company is to surrender all specified rights of property and government in Rupert’s Land, and in other parts of British North America, to the Dominion of Canada.

2d. The Dominion is to pay the Company £300,000.

3d. The Company may select and hold blocks of land adjoining its stations, not exceeding in all 50,000 acres.

For fifty years to come, as surveys are advanced in the “Fertile Belt,” the Company shall have one twentieth part of the land. The bounds of this “Fertile Belt” shall be: South, the United States Line; West, The Rocky Mountains; North, the Northern Branch of the Saskatchewan; East, Lake Winnipeg and the Lake of the Woods.”

All the titles of land previously given by the Company were to be confirmed, and it was to be at liberty to continue its trade in its corporate capacity. The Company tried, but failed, to induce the Dominion to accept some modifications, as, for instance, to allow it $\frac{1}{10}$ instead of $\frac{1}{20}$ of surveyed lands. These portions of land, in surveyed townships, were to be claimed within fifty years. It is probable that within that term all the

specified land will have been surveyed. Two years ago, the portion thus surveyed amounted to 61,863,772 acres, of which the Company receives, 3,093,188 acres. This, it is to be understood, is in addition to the 50,000 acres around its posts.

The Company has withdrawn some of its posts, as that at Fort William, Lake Superior, and that at Rat Portage, head waters of Winnipeg River. Others of its posts it has turned into general wholesale and retail stores, for miscellaneous business,—as at Winnipeg, where is a vast establishment. The Company has ceased to collect furs near the more open and railway regions, and confines that trade to remoter places round the Labrador coast, toward the shores of Hudson Bay, at Fort Churchill and Moose Factory, to the Arctic and north of Athabasca, along the Great Slave Lake and the line of Mackenzie's River, towards the Rocky Mountains.

While thus hardly decreasing its activity in its original business, it has added another, very brisk and profitable, in the sale of land, for which it has a flourishing agency at Winnipeg, apart from its store for traffic.

In the report of the Company for 1882, the profits of the fur trade are put at £70,829.10, and the receipts from land sales at £143,245.1. The sales of land up to that year had brought in to the Company about \$3,250,000.00. The other property, which may be regarded as capital, is about £2,000,000. That the fur trade is still an important one may be seen by the following figures, taken from the report of the Company's sale in London in January, 1884 :

Beaver skins, 104,120; musquash, 1,075,346; American rabbit, 13,595.

The lecture was illustrated by many stereopticon views of scenery, the posts, or forts of the Company, and of natives in their life and occupations.

At the close of Dr. Ellis's lecture, Judge Daly, President of the Society, rose to express the gratification with which he had listened to the clear and interesting account, given by the lecturer, of the history and organization of the powerful Company that had so long ruled with an iron hand the greater part of British America. He had himself paid a great deal of attention to the progress of discovery and the reports of travel in that vast region, and his studies had led him to some of the conclusions arrived at by Dr. Ellis.

Judge Daly recalled a visit which he had made to St. Paul, Minnesota, about thirty years before, when that great and thriving city was hardly more than a village.

He met there Sir George Simpson, the head of the Hudson Bay Company, and there was at the time, in the neighborhood of the town, an encampment of half-breeds, about one hundred in number, who had come on their first visit from the Red River region, for the purpose of establishing relations with the Americans for the exchange of commodities. These people were tall and well made, vigorous, and intelligent, with the Indian type strongly impressed upon the features of the face, and the long, straight hair. They spoke no language but English, and this with a Scotch accent, even more decided than any Judge Daly remembered to have heard in Scotland. They were, in fact, the descendants of the colony planted by the Earl of Selkirk on the Red River in 1811, and their visit to St. Paul conveyed

to the Americans the first intimation of the then unknown wealth and resources of the great Red River country.

On motion of Judge Daly, the thanks of the Society were unanimously voted to Dr. Ellis for his interesting paper.